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NEWS

House GOP leaders blink

By [Alexander Bolton](#) and [Patrick O'Connor](#)

Lacking votes to pass the budget, House Republican leaders struck a deal yesterday with conservative members who had demanded reforms to the spending process.

The deal is a major win for the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC) and signaled a rare concession from powerful GOP leaders.

Republican leaders had charged that the reform demanded by members of the RSC would tie the leadership's hands and empower House Democrats. But realizing that they would otherwise lack the votes to pass the budget this week, the GOP leaders yesterday agreed to conservatives' demand that waiving budget rules for future spending bills require approval by a majority of the House.

The conflict reached full intensity yesterday morning at a closed-door meeting of the House Republican Conference.

After RSC Chairman Mike Pence (R-Ind.), one of the key lawmakers involved in the contentious push for budget reform, addressed the conference, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-Texas) angrily demanded of the conservative rebels how they planned to pass the budget, an implication that reform would make it more difficult to pass budget and appropriations legislation, said a lawmaker who attended the meeting.

"DeLay got into it with some members on the budget," another GOP lawmaker said.

Conservative proponents of reform responded that they liked the budget Republicans passed out of committee and that they simply want to enforce it, the reason they have cited for pushing budget

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“Our ambition was that members of the majority have an opportunity to defend the budget of the majority on the House floor,” Pence said yesterday, announcing the agreement along with conservative Reps. Paul Ryan (Wis.), Jeb Hensarling (Texas) and Jeff Flake (Ariz.). “If any one of the 10 appropriations bills exceeds the budget, any member of Congress would be able to raise a point of order and that would be subject to debate and vote.”

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“I believe this is a significant step forward,” Pence said.

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Ryan explained that a lawmaker would have an opportunity to raise a procedural objection against a budget-breaking spending bill after it had been amended on the House floor but before final passage.

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Pence was 30 minutes late for an early-afternoon RSC meeting because he was putting the finishing touches on the deal. He outlined the deal to RSC members with Neil Bradley, an aide to House Majority Whip Roy Blunt (R-Mo.). It was mentioned in the meeting that Hastert and Blunt helped craft the compromise, suggesting that DeLay was not involved.

A DeLay aide said that DeLay was talking with RSC members yesterday.

The so-called point-of-order protection would not apply to bills produced by conferences with the Senate. It is usually in those negotiations that spending bills are swelled beyond the levels called for in the budget resolution, making yesterday’s agreed-to reform modest in terms of its impact on discretionary spending. In the past five years, the House appropriations panel has seldom sent a bill to the floor out of committee that exceeded the budget, a GOP leadership aide noted.

But the political impact is likely much greater, as it is one of the few times that a faction of Republican House members has battled with the party’s leaders and won. It is all the more significant because the leadership conceded to give up some of its power, perhaps the reason that GOP leaders fought conservatives so hard on the issue.

One Republican RSC aide said, “This is the first time the RSC did anything,” alluding to the group’s previous reputation of buckling under pressure.

The victory belongs primarily to the RSC and its new leader, Pence, who replaced Rep. Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) at the beginning of the year. In yesterday’s meeting, Pence was “stoic” and adamant that the deal should not be portrayed as an RSC win, according to a source in the room.

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Pence, who fended off numerous direct and indirect attacks from leadership and budget officials this past week, said that the past several days have been tiring and emotional, the source added. He also said Hensarling, who was Pence's right-hand man on the budget reforms, deserves the bulk of the credit.

Republican centrists who had joined conservatives in their opposition to a budget resolution not linked to budget reform did not withstand pressure from GOP leaders to fall back into line. The centrists "caved," in the words of one conservative.

Rep. Mark Kirk (Ill.), the co-chairman of the Tuesday Group, acknowledged that it was the RSC that forced leadership to compromise on budget reform.

"The RSC had the bulk of the troops. The centrists helped," said Kirk, who after being asked twice whether centrists had in fact caved to leadership's pressure, cocked his head from one side to another before answering, "We wanted to make sure we didn't come out with nothing, and we didn't. The leadership had a serious offer."

Pence and his conservative allies initially demanded a two-thirds vote of the House be required to waive rules for legislation that violated the budget. They later scaled down their demand, ultimately asking for only a majority vote to waive the rules for spending bills that violated the budget.

The leadership also moderated its counteroffers. Aides familiar with the negotiations said that Blunt initially offered Pence his choice of several compromise measures. The proposals included allowing Republican lawmakers to call a conference meeting on any bill that exceeded the budget and requiring the Rules Committee to explain why it had waived a budget rule on legislation in violation of the budget.

While the budget reforms, by themselves, do little to reduce government spending significantly, RSC members are hopeful other structural changes will be implemented. Pence told the RSC yesterday that GOP leadership indicated it wants more substantive reforms, adding that he believes that commitment is "genuine."

Pence said the budget reform would be a part of the House rules. Kirk said reform would be initially implemented as a standing order of the House, something that has the power of a rule, and formally made a part of the House rules at a later date.

Bob Cusack contributed to this report.

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